



Becoming an ‘Amai’: Meanings and experiences of motherhood amongst Zimbabwean women living in Melbourne, Australia

Sandra Benza, MPH MPH student^a, Pranee Liamputtong, PhD Professor^{b,*}

^a Department of Public Health, College of Science, Health and Engineering, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086, Australia

^b School of Science and Health, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales 2176, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: little is known about the meanings and experiences of motherhood among Zimbabwean migrant women. This paper discusses the meanings and experiences of motherhood from the perspectives of Zimbabwean migrant women living in Melbourne, Australia.

Methods: qualitative methods (in-depth interviewing, photo elicitation and drawing) were conducted with 15 Zimbabwean women who had children in Zimbabwe and in Australia. Data were analysed using thematic analysis method.

Findings: Zimbabwean women defined motherhood in varied ways. Common to all women was that becoming a mother had a significant meaning. Motherhood came with a sense of responsibility for children which resulted from their compromise and sacrifice. The dedication was exhibited by participants who demonstrated commitment to motherhood when striving to be a good mother. While motherhood provided pleasure and joy, some women found the role of motherhood burdensome in their new homeland. Due to cultural expectations of motherhood, women kept their difficulties silent for fear of being judged a ‘bad mother’. The unfamiliarity with the health and social care systems in Australia presented challenges to these women. Often, they were treated without respect and felt discriminated against.

Conclusions: our findings reveal the paradox of motherhood. Although motherhood can be burdensome, there are positive changes brought about by the process of motherhood. Due to a lack of knowledge about the health and social care system and the negative experiences with health care in Australia, the women felt overwhelmed about becoming a mother in Australia.

Implications: healthcare providers, including midwives, need to understand how migrant women perceive and experience motherhood and their mothering role as this will help to improve the health and social care for these women and their children. Findings from this study provide a basis for further investigation into the formation and strengthening of support networks for Zimbabwean mothers in particular, and to other migrant women in general.

Background

Motherhood is a significant life transition that holds special meanings to individual women and their families (Hoang and Kilpatrick, 2009; Murray et al., 2010; Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015). According to Goodwin and Huppatz, (2010), motherhood not only shapes the woman's life and identity, but it also disrupts their sense of self. Motherhood involves physical and emotional experiences that result in a sense of responsibility for the baby (Miller, 2005; Liamputtong, 2006). Becoming a mother is a special life event that includes permanent role changes and assumption of new responsibilities (Ettowa, 2012). There are also other social determinants that impact

on motherhood and the mothering role such as, the social and moral discourses of motherhood (Miller, 2005; Liamputtong, 2006). For women who are also new migrants, becoming a mother while attempting to settle in a new country where the culture is markedly different, can be challenging (Liamputtong, 2006; Levi, 2010; Shafiei et al., 2012; Benza and Liamputtong, 2014; Hennegan et al., 2014, 2015; Small et al., 2014; Yelland et al., 2015, 2016), and for African migrant women this is no exception (Carolan and Cassar, 2008; Levi, 2010; Ettowa, 2012; Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015).

Motherhood expectations and individual experiences are shaped by cultural values (Miller, 2005). These social constructions shape an individual's expectations when women perform their mothering role

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pranee.liamputtong@westernsydney.edu.au (P. Liamputtong).

and these are influenced by how certain practices are accepted as normal or natural (Miller, 2005; Liamputtong, 2006). It is through these social constructions that these women are judged as good or bad mothers (McMahon, 1995; Liamputtong, 2006).

To date, little is known about how Zimbabwean women see and experience motherhood, particularly those who have migrated to another country. In order to understand various factors that influence the experiences of motherhood and mothering practices for Zimbabwean migrant women, it is important to understand how these women perceive and cope with motherhood in a new social environment. In this paper, we discuss the meanings and experiences of motherhood from the perspectives of Zimbabwean women living in Melbourne, Australia. Three research questions guided this exploration: 1) How do Zimbabwean women perceive motherhood?; 2) What are their perceived roles of motherhood?; and 3) What are their experiences of motherhood and the mothering role?

Moral career and motherhood: theoretical framework

In this paper, we situate our discussion on the moral career of motherhood theory (Murphy, 1999; Liamputtong, 2006). The moral career of motherhood refers to the expectations of mothers as the “keepers of morality” when women carry out their mothering practices (Liamputtong, 2006, p. 25). The ideologies of good motherhood include staying at home and devotion to childrearing (Miller, 2005). For some women, it can be difficult to match the idealised image of a ‘good mother’ (McMahon, 1995; Goodwin and Huppertz, 2010). For migrant women in particular, there is a sense of disillusionment as they feel they are not performing their role adequately, especially if there are other demands in their daily life including the need to work to bring an income into the family (Liamputtong, 2006).

Although motherhood is influenced by the moral principles of being responsible for others especially her children (Liamputtong, 2006), there is a false impression of motherhood by the media and society. Goodwin and Huppertz (2010) contend that the social constructions of a good mother place an enormous amount of pressure on women to behave according to certain standards based on how they are judged, or how they judge themselves.

For some women, failure to meet the demands of motherhood leads to mixed emotions and feelings of inadequacy (Liamputtong, 2006). Motherhood can thus be burdensome for these women. This is particularly so for migrant women (Benza and Liamputtong, 2014; Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015). These challenges are based on two issues: being a migrant and a mother at the same time. According to Koniak-Griffin et al. (2006), expectations of good motherhood are sometimes far from idealistic, particularly when mothers face criticism and blame if their child/ren display socially unacceptable behaviours. Mothers are expected to teach their children the language and cultural beliefs from the country of origin, while assisting them to fit into the new environment where the culture is completely different (Koniak-Griffin et al., 2006; Liamputtong, 2006). Mothers bear the blame when things go wrong (Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2015). These mother blaming attitudes often make mothers have doubts about their mothering practices, and may impact on their emotional well-being (Koniak-Griffin et al., 2006).

Methodology

This paper is based on our qualitative research conducted with Zimbabwean women in Melbourne, Australia. A qualitative approach was essential in order to have an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Zimbabwean migrant mothers. Qualitative research allows us to have better understanding about the meanings and interpretations of peoples’ experiences (Bourgeault et al., 2010; Liamputtong, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

In this study, in-depth interviewing method was used in combina-

tion with drawing and photo elicitation methods. These methods allowed for rich detailed information to be collected (Liamputtong, 2007). Using photographs as part of the interview is known as the photo elicitation method (Harper, 2002). Photographs ‘evoke information, feelings and memories’ of individuals (Harper, 2002: 13). Participants were able to narrate what they saw in the photographs and relate the meanings to their own migrant motherhood experiences. Drawing as a research tool provides a rich insight into how people make sense of their world (Guillemin, 2004). Drawings continue from the narratives and the images are more effective in providing meanings to other aspects that an individual may not be able to describe (Liamputtong, 2007). Therefore, combining the in-depth interviews, photo elicitation and drawing, in this study allowed in-depth details of the women's perceptions and lived experiences as migrant mothers to be explored.

The study was conducted in suburbs within Greater Melbourne where the majority of Zimbabwean people reside. The participants were recruited through the Zimbabwean Victorian Association. It is through this Association that Zimbabweans meet for social gatherings. The first author is a Zimbabwean-born woman and this allowed her to be able to establish a relationship with the Zimbabwean community leaders. This connection with the community helped us with the recruitment and data collection processes. We were able to recruit all women through this association, hence, no other recruiting method was adopted.

The sample size was determined by a theoretical sampling method, whereby recruitment stopped after reaching data saturation (when little new data can be generated) (Liamputtong, 2013). Fifteen women participated in this study; only one woman was not married and the majority of participants had lived in Australia for between six to fifteen years. Eleven women were aged between 32 years and 40 years and the remaining four were aged 41 years and above. Fourteen women had attained tertiary education and one had a high school diploma. All women were in employment at the time of this study: eleven working part-time, three full-time and one self-employed. Most participants were religious, with 14 Christians and one not specified. The ages of their children ranged from 14 months to 18 years old; two-thirds of the children were under 12 years old.

All the women participated in individual interviews and these lasted between one to two hours for each participant as this also involved drawings and photo elicitation. The interviews were conducted by the first author and these were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Several open-ended questions were used to prompt the women to discuss their meanings and experiences of motherhood. Specifically for this paper, the following questions were used in our interview:

1. What does motherhood mean to you?
2. How do people in your culture think about motherhood?
3. In your view, what are the roles of mothers?
4. Can you tell me about your thoughts regarding motherhood?
5. Can you share the journey you went through when you become a mother in Australia?

Twelve photos relevant to the research topic were selected from the Internet and the local bookshop. These photos that depicted African women and children in different ways were selected based on the main aims of the study. During the interviews, all photographs were shown to the participants and each participant was invited to select any five of those photographs that best described their meanings and experiences of motherhood. As for the drawings, each participant was encouraged to draw at least three images relevant to the research questions. We provided each woman with a package of 12 coloured pencils and several A4 size blank sheets. Fourteen participants were happy to draw the images except one participant.

During the interviews, the Zimbabwean women were given the choice of speaking in English, Shona or Ndebele as the first author was

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